



# Bereavement and your autistic child

Alison Footitt, our charity's Highland Information Officer, explains how to help an autistic child with bereavement

Dealing with change can be very hard for an autistic child, and dealing with the profound change of bereavement can be incredibly challenging, especially when all the family may be impacted by the loss.

Here are a few ideas that might help your family or the child you are supporting:

1. Use concrete terms, not "passed away", "asleep" or "gone to a better place". Whatever your beliefs, use factual terms such as "died".
2. Use visuals to help the child. Seeing a plant or flower that has died can show that something that was once alive has died and will not come back to life.

3. Use social stories. A good social story is written for that child and that situation. It can help with many scenarios, such as visiting an ill person in hospital. Engage with your child's school or support network for this, or write your own social story - there is advice on the Pines website (see below).
4. If the death is expected - for example, a very ill grandparent - help the child prepare for it. If you are visiting someone ill in hospital, explain what they will look like: for example, in bed surrounded by medical equipment.
5. Remember, your child's reactions may not be typical to grief; they may not cry or appear to show emotion. They may be very angry or show no reaction at all for several months while they process the information. This might be hard for wider family members to see, but it does not mean your child does not care; emotions can be very hard to process.
6. Help to communicate emotions. You could use a visual sliding scale for each member of the family to check-in and show how they are feeling, or a simple silicon wristband for the child that they can flip from green to red when a break is needed.
7. Keep up routines if you can - for example, consistent bedtimes and mealtimes. When the time is right, a return to a regular school pattern may be beneficial.
8. Be prepared to answer difficult questions about death and what has happened.
9. Give your child time to enjoy what they love. Spending time with whatever they are passionate about will be good for their wellbeing.
10. Be strong in the certainty you know what is best for your child. If they want to wear comfy joggers to a funeral, this is fine. As long as you are accepting, you do not have to justify your choices to anyone.
11. The decision about whether a child should attend a funeral service is yours. You know them best, and while some children may benefit from being at a ceremony to say goodbye, others will not. If the child is attending, prepare them for what will happen, such as seeing a coffin, and that many people may be upset. Find photos of the venue or crematorium and visit ahead of the service if you can.
12. Think of your child's sensory needs. Would they benefit from ear defenders or a comfort teddy?
13. Take food and snacks with you that you know your child will eat.
14. If there will be lots of people there who do not know your child, be prepared. You could carry our charity's 'My child is autistic' card.
15. Investigate local and national bereavement services. Keep your child's school informed and ask for additional support and understanding.
16. Make a memory box and include sensory items, such as a hanky sprayed with a favourite perfume.
17. Look after yourself. Dealing with your own grief, as well as supporting your child, may be very difficult. You need care, too.

**Remember, your child's reactions may not be typical to grief; they may not cry or appear to show emotion**



The Pines website has been created by the National Autistic Society and other autism professionals in Highland, and is available for use throughout the UK. It includes videos and advice on many autism-related topics, including bereavement, social stories and distressed behaviour.

Pines website - [www.thepineshighland.com](http://www.thepineshighland.com)

Pines YouTube - [www.youtube.com/@thepines-highland/videos](https://www.youtube.com/@thepines-highland/videos)